

**NMFS PROPOSES TO REDUCE DISCARDS OF,
AND MODIFY TARGET CATCH REQUIREMENTS FOR PELAGIC LONGLINE
VESSELS RETAINING INCIDENTAL CATCH OF,
ATLANTIC BLUEFIN TUNA**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) proposes to amend regulations governing the Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT) fishery to reduce discards of BFT in the Atlantic pelagic longline fishery. The intent of these actions is to minimize dead discards of BFT and improve management of the Atlantic pelagic longline fishery, while complying with the National Standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) and allowing harvest consistent with recommendations of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.

Since 1977, NOAA Fisheries has implemented a series of management measures designed to regulate the incidental catch of BFT in non-directed Atlantic fisheries, including prohibiting the use of longlines for a directed BFT fishery, implementing incidental catch limits, and establishing northern and southern management areas where different catch limits apply. Despite efforts to alter target catch requirements and adjust geographic management areas, bycatch and discards of BFT by U.S. pelagic longline vessels has continued, and NOAA Fisheries has continued to evaluate management alternatives achieve a balance between allowing the retention of truly incidentally caught BFT while preventing a directed fishery and reducing discards.

In this action, NOAA Fisheries proposes to lower minimum target catch requirements in all areas, at all times, to 2,000 lbs. (907 kg) to retain one BFT and 6,000 lbs. (2,722 kg) to retain two BFT; maintain a boundary line between the northern and southern areas but move the boundary line to 31°00' N. Latitude, near Jekyll Island, Georgia (an area with little longline fishing activity nearby), and allocate 30 percent to the northern area and 70 percent to the southern area; and establish inseason adjustment authority to adjust the BFT retention limits for pelagic longline vessels by number over a range from zero to three fish per trip and/or by weight within 25 percent of the target catch requirements (e.g., 2,000 lbs. to 2,500 lbs.).

Written comments on the proposed rule must be received by 5 p.m. on February 7, 2003. Public hearings on the proposed rule will be announced in a separate notice.

This FAX notice is a courtesy to BFT fishery participants to help keep you informed about your fishery. Official notice of Federal fishery actions is made through filing such notice with the Office of the Federal Register. For further information, contact Brad McHale at (978) 281-9260.

John H. Dunnigan
Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries

December 23, 2002